Due Consideration: Controversy in the Age of Medical Miracles

Arthur Caplan, New York, John Wiley, 1998, 282 pages, US$17.95.

We live in an age where biomedical research will dramatically change the way humans live. Cloning, genetic engineering and "designer" children are no longer science fiction. Every day media headlines report technological advances that challenge the way we think about our future and what that future ought to hold. In *Due Consideration* Arthur Caplan, in his inimitable style, takes a look at the current and future ethical challenges in biomedicine and at the consequences they may have on our lives.

With wit, clarity and insight Caplan explores the controversial moral questions of the day. If a woman could have some of the cells of her aborted fetus frozen in order to grow a genetically identical fetus at some time in the future, would we still consider that she had killed her fetus? Should researchers be permitted to remove and fertilise eggs from the mummified body of a 500-year-old Inca girl? When a man dies should sperm retrieval be offered to his relatives? Should eggs from aborted fetuses be used to help infertile women conceive? Should smokers be allowed to be adoptive parents? This book is successful not only in its analysis of such controversial moral questions but also as a chronicle of the social context that produced them. In his analysis, Caplan sets the latest from medical journals against the background of more everyday details of Oprah, gang violence, Thighmaster, inflatable Santas, CNN, Cyberporn and the O J Simpson trial.

Caplan is not shy of expressing strong opinions on some of the most crucial issues in bioethics. Although forthright in his views, he presents an optimistic vision of the future. He suggests that "One could make a pretty fair living forecasting and bemoaning the horrors that await us if biomedicine is permitted to proceed at its current rate of success. And many ethicists do"(page 2). Caplan, however, dismisses the idea that science cannot be modulated by ethics and that progress will inevitably end in disaster and invites us to contemplate a world where biomedical advances, while forcing us to consider what we, as human persons, ought to allow, will enable us to live longer, healthier and happier lives. He provides a view not only of the rational and the ethical but also of the human perspective, where quality of life often involves indulgence in activities that may be bad for us, in the medical sense but are "good for the soul". He gives hope in the face of the health fanaticism which, while perhaps justified in its attempt to encourage us to quit smoking, seems to be trying to prohibit all other human pleasures too. Sunshine, fatty foods, television and fine wines are all targets of this fanaticism and Caplan enthusiastically cites Professor James McCormick of Community Health and General Practice at Trinity College in Dublin, who, in *The Lancet* writes that members of his profession "would do better to encourage people to live lives of modified hedonism, so that they may enjoy, to the full, the only life they are likely to have"(page 277).

You may not agree with all of Caplan's answers to these vexing questions of our time but this wide ranging and enjoyable book will certainly force you to consider moral questions you may never have considered before and reconsider ethical views that you have previously held.

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How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest

Peter Singer, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, xviii + 318 pages, £8.99.

This is not a book directly about medical ethical issues, which are, Singer says in *Practical Ethics*,[1] within ethics. Concerning these we may have moral disagreements, such as those over abortion. In *How Are We To Live?* Singer turns to a question about ethics. The principal philosophical challenge is Singer's attempt to give a non-ethical reason for choosing the ethical life.

This non-ethical reason is that the ethical life is in our own best interests, an answer at least as old as *The Republic*,[2] as Singer recognises. But Singer thinks contemporary self-interest, identified with "the decade of greed" (the 1980s in Western developed nations) is discordant with ethics. For, it was motivated by competitive material acquisition, a motivation insensitive to the community possible among beings, but consistent with Hobbes's vision of humans in the state of nature. We need to rethink self-interest.

Singer has also to see off contemporary sociobiology which he conceives will view genuine moral behaviour as impossible, let alone optional. Here he points out that we probably evolved to care for people other than ourselves, our children for instance, and perhaps wider groups too: there is good reason to believe that cooperation contributes to the survival of individuals. As Singer points out, this evolutionary fact is consistent with genuinely ethical motivation.

We can, then, opt to live ethically. "The decade of greed" appears to show we can opt to live selfishly. There is a genuine choice to be made.

For Singer, it is a rational choice, though not a Kantian choice. Singer's objection to Kant is that he refuses in effect to answer the question how are we to live. Kant says we are ethical if we do our ethical duty for duty's sake. But this is no reason, and is consistent with the most trivial and the most appalling content of those duties: plausibly, Adolph Eichmann was in some sense dutiful.

Nevertheless, Eichmann did not judge ethically, according to Singer, since he did not universalise, but made his judgments from a limited perspective. However, universality, though the mark of ethical judgments, is not a reason for making, or acting in accordance with, them. Singer adds that it is the consequences that flow from an ethical act which really matter. These fill out the content of the ethical life. What gives meaning and purpose to people's lives are the right causes to which they dedicate themselves: anti-corruption, animal liberation, women's rights, and the environment.

Singer has a problem here. For the judgment that these are right causes is an ethical one. It is presumably based on the goodness of their consequences, but this too is an ethical judgment. So, these are choices we make from within, rather than of, the ethical life, whereas what Singer says he wants is something from outside ethics.

Singer's rational response is, he admits, only partial. Others (humans and animals) have senses, and like us, feel suffering and pain. Having ac-